

## ***PERSONAL SAFETY & SECURITY OVERSEAS***

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Living and traveling in a foreign country offers a wonderful opportunity to engage other cultures and broaden one's life experiences, but also presents certain risks to your personal safety and security. Each individual can develop effective strategies to reduce exposure to these risks and still have an enjoyable, productive and safe experience. Common sense is the watchword here. But given cultural differences, it is not always clear what "common" is. In this regard understanding the language and culture of the host country and developing relationships locally will provide the clues to determining the most appropriate strategies for reducing your exposure to risk. It takes time to develop the understanding and skills to recognize and accurately interpret the cultural cues and nuances that attend daily interactions. Your actions and exposure to risk should be guided by an appreciation of this vulnerability. If you spend time in a big city, exercise the same awareness and vigilance you would in the US. There are no firm guarantees for your safety, but there are attitudes you can develop and actions you can take to reduce the risk of being victimized. Immediately upon arrival in country contact the Consular Section at the US Embassy (or appropriate embassy) to discuss your new environment and any security concerns that you might have. The Regional Security Officer (RSO) or the Consular Officer at the US Embassy can provide security briefings, resources and support for you and your family. Fellow expatriates and local colleagues will also have a wealth of information and guidance for you. When it comes to personal safety and security in a variety of foreign environments, there are few definitive prescriptions. But experience has taught us some useful lessons.

### **1. Pre-Departure**

As you prepare to travel, live and work overseas you can best enhance your personal safety and security by educating yourself about the destination country. The internet and contact persons who have recently traveled to the same destination are valuable sources of useful information and lessons learned. Here are some other measures that may prove useful:

- Ensure your home is secured and protected while you are away.
- Ensure that insurance policies are up to date and arrange for payment of premiums.
- Authorize a Power of Attorney for a trusted individual.
- Make out a will.
- Consider getting a telephone calling card and/or a GSM (tri-band) cellular phone that allows access to most local cellular systems (and provides a single contact number).
- Take out property insurance on necessary equipment (cameras, binoculars, laptops, etc.)
- Travel light. Carry clothing that is conservative and practical. If you'd hate to lose it, don't bring it.
- Take an extra pair of glasses. Contact lenses can be problematic in many countries.
- Subscribe to a new credit card with low credit limit separate from existing credit cards.
- Notify your credit card company of your intent to travel. Confirm credit limit.

- Photocopy passport and visa, credit cards, other documents that need to be replaced quickly, if lost or stolen. Leave one set of copies with reliable person at home and carry extra copies in places separate from originals.
- Bring at least a dozen extra passport photos.
- Make sure health insurance covers foreign medical providers and medevac expenses.
- Visit country-specific websites for information on political, social, economic, geographic, and other characteristics of your destination country.
- Review project documents, demographic studies, economic surveys.
- Set up a hotmail account in order to communicate and/or electronically store communiqués and reports.
- Visit Dept. of State, Consular Affairs website for security advisories and other travel guidance ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)). Other government websites include: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov), [www.ds-osac.org](http://www.ds-osac.org).
- Other useful websites are [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov), [www.airsecurity.com](http://www.airsecurity.com), [www.fieldsecurity.com](http://www.fieldsecurity.com), [www.interaction.org](http://www.interaction.org), [www.usc.edu/globaled/safeti](http://www.usc.edu/globaled/safeti) or; [www.asirt.org](http://www.asirt.org) provides transportation safety information for many countries.
- Consider the climate and weather at your point of destination and/or any layover cities. Check out [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com).
- Get an international driver's license (from AAA).
- If you plan to carry prescription medicines, be sure to have authorization to carry such from your physician. Some prescription medicines are considered controlled substances in other countries.
- Start learning a few common phrases in the local language, and the basics of cultural values (male-female relations, shaking hands, eye contact, gifts, etc.).
- If possible, establish a reliable, personal contact in the country of destination. Communicate frequently (for clarification, response to concerns, guidance, etc.) with this individual prior to departure.
- Know the location and contact information for your consulate or embassy at the country of destination. Carry this and all important information on your person.
- In your carry-on bag include: a personal first aid kit, dental floss, Listerine, a small flashlight and extra batteries, sun screen, sewing kit – no scissors).
- Leave travel itinerary and contact information with family or friends; otherwise keep this information confidential.
- Understand the laws and currency exchange rates in destination country.
- Carry small bills in US currency for tipping (one dollar per bag is a reasonable estimate).

## **2. Air Travel**

The hassles and stress of airline travel can make you vulnerable to criminal activity. Those who prey upon travelers are ready to take advantage should you become distracted while waiting in line, checking-in, negotiating your luggage, or changing money. Given the high state of security at many airports expect delays and sudden changes in flight schedules. You may wish to consider the following:

- Pack your luggage wisely. Make sure to carry any prohibited materials (scissors, files, other sharp objects) in your check-in luggage.

- Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothing and durable slip-on shoes.
- Be sure to pack 2-3 day 'survival items' in your carry-on bag. This includes: medicines and toiletries, extra change of clothes and undergarments, important documents, drinking water, dry food snack, journal, etc.
- Arrive at the airport in plenty of time. Usually two hours before departure should suffice, but extraordinary security measures may mean longer delays than usual.
- Move through passenger security immediately after ticketing and locate departure gate.
- Stay with your bags at all times.
- Do not openly display your name tags on your luggage. Do not include your address, only a contact telephone number.
- Do not display company logo on luggage. Place a business card in a visible place inside each piece of luggage.
- Be careful about how much of your personal/business information you share with fellow passengers. After all, the other person is still a stranger.
- Limit intake of alcohol in flight. Drink plenty of water to counteract 'jet lag'. This will help limit stress and increase alertness.
- Set your watch to local time.
- If possible, pre-arrange transport from the airport to your hotel. Consider paying the additional room rate for a hotel that provides shuttle service to and from the airport.
- Have your immigration and customs documents in order and available. A leather folder secured by a buckle or elastic band may be useful.
- Be patient.
- Beware of airport 'expeditors' who offer to process your documents. If they are legitimate, they should have valid airport photo identification.
- Change some money into local currency before you leave the airport (at least double the amount of taxi fare).

### **3. Ground Travel**

Experience suggests that one's vulnerability to accident or crime increases while traveling overland. Not only may the environment and road conditions be unfamiliar to you, you may also encounter dangerous road conditions; untrained or unlicensed drivers; drivers operating under the influence of alcohol; vehicles that are poorly maintained and therefore hazardous (no headlights or tail lights, faulty brakes, smooth tires etc.); police checkpoints or roadblocks; bandits and other criminals. Some recommendations for ground travel follow:

- Plan your trips carefully. Always know where you are going.
- Study a map. Identify potential hazards and safe havens.
- Before you leave, let a trusted person know your itinerary, but otherwise safeguard your plans.
- Restrict night travel.
- Travel with others when possible.
- Avoid hitchhiking and/or picking up hitchhikers.
- Do not take shortcuts through remote or unlighted areas.
- Have someone meet you at your destination point. When you arrive, let others know.

- Use a common vehicle model (local taxis may be a good indicator). If you rent, remove any markings that identify vehicle as a rental.
- Carry a cell phone, first aid kit, maps, flashlight, and official documents in your vehicle.
- Keep the vehicle windows rolled up and the doors locked.
- Use the seat belts.
- Be alert to scam artists and carjackers while stopped in traffic.
- Understand the local “rules” for response should you be involved in or witness a traffic accident. In many cases, stopping for an accident can put your life at risk.
- Only take official, licensed taxis. Note the license plate number of taxi – write it down.
- Avoid getting into a taxi already occupied by others. If necessary, pay extra for a single fare. Negotiate price before getting in taxi. Have money ready to pay in appropriate denominations.
- Take a seat on a bus or train that allows you to observe fellow passengers, but does not preclude options to change seats if necessary.

#### **4. At the Hotel**

When you arrive at your point of destination, you will be eager to settle-in, unpack your bags, take a shower and get your bearings (not necessarily in that order). Opportunistic and predatory criminals often target hotel guests who are deemed to be rich and vulnerable, and unlikely engage the local authorities or to stick around long enough to prosecute. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Use reputable hotels, hostels or boarding houses – your safety is worth any added cost.
- Take a walk around the hotel facilities to familiarize yourself with your environment. Are hotel personnel located on each floor? Are they in uniform? Display any identification?
- Inspect room carefully. Look under the bed, in the showers and closets.
- Call the front desk to ensure telephone works.
- Ensure door and window locks are working. Don’t forget the sliding glass door.
- Ensure door has a peephole and chain lock.
- Avoid ground floor rooms at the hotel. Second through fifth floors are desirable (harder to break into, but still accessible to firefighting equipment).
- Read the safety instructions in your hotel room. Familiarize yourself with hotel emergency exits and fire extinguishers.
- Count the doors between your room and nearest emergency exit (in case of fire or blackout). Rehearse your escape plan.
- Keep hotel door locked with dead bolt or chain at all times (don’t forget the sliding glass door and windows).
- Consider traveling with rubber door stop, smoke detector, motion detector.
- Identify your visitor before you open the door.
- Meet visitors in the lobby. Avoid entertaining strangers in your room.
- If you doubt room delivery, check with the front desk before opening the door.
- If you are out of your room, leave television/radio on. Place “do not disturb” sign outside door.

- Don't leave sensitive documents or valuables in the open, unattended in the room.
- Keep your laptop out of sight, in a safe or in a locked suitcase. You may wish to use a laptop cable lock to secure your laptop to a window frame or bathroom plumbing.
- You may wish to use a hotel safety deposit box. Be sure you can gain access to your valuables when you need to.
- Avoid using a hotel front office safe. Because many individuals may have access, should anything go missing finding the culprit, let alone recovering your property will prove difficult.
- Keep your room number to yourself. If your room key is numbered, or has your room number on a key holder, keep it out of sight. If a hotel clerk announces your room number loud enough for others to hear, ask for a new room.

## 5. Awareness

Personal safety begins with awareness. Awareness begins with a clear understanding of one's attitudes, values, self-esteem, personal strengths and limitations. What does your attitude, dress, and body language say about your vulnerability? It continues with insight into the host culture and environment and how you might be perceived based on local attitudes toward strangers, gender perceptions, values, mores and means of communicating. Major risk factors associated with assault are: being alone, out at night, under the influence of alcohol or drugs and frequenting high-risk locations. Choose to control for these risk factors. In order to be alert to potential dangers and risks to your well-being, you need to be aware of what is going on in your immediate environment.

Study. Observe. Ask. Some general themes for raising awareness follow:

- Assess your emotional and physical strengths and limitations.
- Be attentive to how you are perceived by local people and behave in a manner that is not provocative or draws unwanted attention.
- Set your watch to local time.
- Strive to understand the local language and cultural norms.
- Understand local currency exchange rates.
- Familiarize yourself with your neighborhood and work environment.
- Use street smarts. Beware of pickpockets, scam artists, over-friendly strangers, loiterers, etc.
- Remove name tags or convention badges outside venue.
- Pay attention to local media (newspapers, radio, television, gossip).
- Be aware of the people nearby, of dark streets, of parked cars.
- Beware of strangers who try to engage you to gain your trust.
- Keep alert to potential trouble and choose to avoid when possible. Trust your instincts.
- Educate yourself of any pending events (elections, demonstrations, anniversaries) that may cause civil disturbance, and avoid unnecessary risks.
- Establish a support network among your colleagues and US embassy personnel.
- Inform yourself of the availability and reliability of local support services (police, security, medical, emergency, fire).
- Confirm with the US embassy the procedures for you and your family in the event of a crisis or evacuation.

- Politely decline offers of food or drink from strangers.
- Accept beverages only in sealed containers; make sure there's been no tampering.

## **6. Personal Conduct**

It is important to appreciate the image you (as an American abroad) project and thus, how you are perceived by others. MTV, CNN, and television programs that depict violent conflict and/or promiscuous, well-to-do Americans are widely watched. Local people of all stripes may look upon you and your behavior in light of these predominant images. While the US Consular Office will surely provide you with some security guidance, the choices you make regarding behavior, attire, travel, possessions, relationships, etc. will influence your exposure to risk. How you behave affects not only your personal safety, but the safety of others with whom you are associated. It is incumbent upon each one of us to conduct ourselves in a manner that is neither disrespectful nor provocative.

- Behave professionally and in a manner befitting your status in the local society. Insist on being treated with respect.
- Dress in a manner that is inoffensive to local cultural norms.
- Avoid clothing that shows your nationality or political views.
- Establish personal boundaries and act to protect them.
- Exercise added caution on occasions when displaying conspicuous possessions (jewelry, walkman, sunglasses, camera, etc.).
- Vary the patterns of your behavior to be less predictable.
- Divide money among several pockets. If you carry a wallet, carry it in a front pocket.
- If you carry a purse, carry it close to your body. Do not set it down or leave it unattended.
- Take a patient and calm approach to ambiguity and conflict.
- Radiate confidence while walking in public places.
- Follow your instincts. If a situation is uncomfortable, remove yourself from that situation.
- Be cool when facing confrontation; focus on de-escalation and escape.
- Respect local sensitivities to photographing/videotaping, especially at airports, police and government facilities.
- Carry official identification with you at all times.
- Report any security incidents to the RSO (who will advise you of options - reporting to local authorities, prosecution, corrective measures, etc.).
- Maintain a low-key profile, especially in places where there may be hostility toward Americans.
- Avoid public expressions about local politics, religion and other sensitive topics.
- Avoid being out late at night or after curfew.

## **7. Residential**

The RSO at each post conducts an annual security assessment that is used to determine the Security Environment Threat List (SETL) of that post. The SETL designation will determine the minimum safety standards for US government facilities (including offices

and American staff residences). These standards provide a benchmark against which you can determine your own needs. Here are some security measures you might want to consider:

- Ensure the sound, secure structure of your residence.
- Strictly control access to and distribution of keys.
- Install adequate lighting, window grilles, alarm systems, perimeter walls as necessary.
- Establish access procedures for strangers and visitors.
- Hire trained guards, night patrols. Periodically check-up on guards.
- Set-up a safe room in your house.
- Establish rapport with neighbors. Is there a 'neighborhood watch' program?
- Seek guidance from local colleagues or expatriates who have insight into local housing arrangements.
- Ensure adequate communications (telephone, radio, cell phone) with local colleagues and US Embassy.
- Install back-up generator and/or solar panels.
- Set aside emergency supplies (food, water, medicine, fuel, etc.).
- Install smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and carbon monoxide monitors, as appropriate.
- Avoid sleeping with the windows open or unlocked.

## **8. If You Become A Victim**

Despite all of your efforts to reduce exposure to risks and to avoid threats, you may still become the victim of a crime or critical event. Following are some general response strategies:

- Remain calm and alert.
- Try first to defuse the situation. Culturally appropriate greetings or humor may reduce tensions.
- If an assailant demands property, give it up.
- You can create a timely diversion by tossing your wallet, watch, etc. to the ground in the opposite direction you choose to flee.
- Against overwhelming odds (weapons, multiple assailants) try reasoning, cajoling, begging, any psychological ploy.
- Carefully note details of the environment around you (license plate #, distinguishing features, accents, clothing, etc.).
- If you feel your life is endangered and you decide to physically resist, commit to the decision with every fiber of your being. Turn fear into fury.
- Report any incident to the RSO.
- Seek support for post-traumatic stress (even if you exhibit no symptoms).

## **9. Highjacking/Kidnapping**

As an American/Western you may be targeted for kidnapping. Those who perpetrate these crimes are either promoting a political agenda and/or seeking to gain a financial or political dividend. Travelers are highly advised to be aware whether there is a history or risk (known threats, targeting) of kidnappings in places they intend to travel and take

necessary precautions. Because hostage situations vary greatly, the following considerations should be applied based on one's best judgment at the time:

- The US government policy not to pay ransom to kidnappers is firm.
- The greatest risk of physical harm exists at the point of capture and during a rescue attempt or upon release.
- Remain calm and alert, exert control on emotions and behavior.
- Be passively cooperative, but maintain your dignity.
- Assume an inconspicuous posture, avoid direct eye contact with captors.
- Avoid resistance, belligerence or threatening movements.
- Make reasonable, low-key requests for personal comforts (bathroom breaks, a blanket, exercise, books to read, etc.)
- If questioned, keep answers short. Volunteer nothing.
- As a captive situation draws out, try to establish some rapport with your captors.
- Avoid discussing contentious issues (politics, religion, ethnicity, etc.)
- Establish a daily regiment to maintain yourself physically and mentally.
- Eat what your captors provide. Consume little food and drink. Avoid alcohol.
- Keep a positive, hopeful attitude.
- Attempt to escape only after weighing the risks and when you are certain to succeed.